

TAAPCS Response to Action on Research and Innovation:

The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta

Jan. 19, 2011

Preamble

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) is pleased to provide a response to “Action on Research and Innovation: The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta”. Several general observations are provided before specific responses are offered.

During the course of our recent association meeting, delegates noted the following:

1. While the concept of “choice” has historically been associated with charter schools as a foundational principle, there is no mention of this in the survey.
2. The survey is closely aligned with the Charter School Concept paper, which is good, but it appears to be constructed in such a manner as to suggest that decisions about the future have already been made. For example, charter schools exist for the reasons of research and innovation, and choice is no longer important.
3. While the survey, in large part, relates to “future” charter schools, it gives rise to the question, “What implications does this have for current charter schools?”
4. Charter schools have a history of success as was noted in the Concept Paper which was circulated for reaction in 2009. The support we have received from Alberta Education throughout the years has no doubt contributed greatly to this success. Our association also understands, however, that even with success, change is inevitable. Our request is to fully participate in the change process which will result from the reactions to this survey.

Association response:

1. Our Association’s three main goals are:
 - a. **To implement an enhanced research and innovation agenda** – We are very open to discussions in this regard. In fact, over the past 15 months we have indicated to the Minister and Deputy Minister numerous times our willingness to move this agenda forward. On January 11, 2010, for instance, we sent a letter to the Deputy Minister asking Alberta Education to convene a meeting between representatives from various stakeholder groups so that discussions could begin regarding what “Centres of innovation and Research” might look like, and, more specifically, what is meant by “innovation”. We were informed that it was too early in the process to convene such meetings and, while we understood the logic of this response, we undertook to do so ourselves. Consequently we met with various stakeholder groups to begin to explore the aspect of “partnerships”. The meetings with the Deans of Education and one College Dean, while pleasant, indicated to us that participation with charter schools in research and innovation would need to fit solidly with their agendas before they would become involved. Meetings with our colleagues at CASS were more positive, and we believe closer partnerships are already starting to result. Meetings with the ASBA to address historic difficulties between our associations have yet to take place, but it is our understanding that this issue has been discussed at their executive level. Our

meeting with the President and the Executive Secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association was cordial, as well as helpful, in clarifying our respective positions. Currently, many of our teachers are associate ATA members and therefore participate in professional development activities as well as, in some instances, serving in leadership capacities on ATA Specialist Councils. However, given the School Act's exemption for teachers in charter schools to be ATA members, it appears that additional partnership possibilities for the future may be limited.

We value the enhancement and creation of authentic partnerships that are being proposed, but believe Alberta Education has a major part to play in facilitating the development of these partnerships. In addition, as post-secondary institutions operate under the jurisdiction of Advanced Education and Technology, is there not a role for that department in the discussions about partnerships with charter schools?

Clearly, if charter schools were to become Centres of Innovation and Research as well as resource centres for professional development, appropriate funding would need to follow. We do not support taking allocations from current provincial funds (e.g. AISI) to be redirected to charter schools. Our belief is that charter schools are not the only institutions in this province doing good work regarding innovation and research, as well as professional development, and therefore feel that it would be inappropriate for others to be negatively impacted in any way.

As noted earlier, while innovation and research are important for charter schools, so too is allowing parents and students to have "choice", and this foundational principle must be a part of the discussion. In this respect, enrollment caps need to be discussed, because having caps lessens choice for a number of our schools and waiting lists continue to grow.

In regard to choice, in its reaction to the Commission on Learning (March 2004), the government rejected recommendation #26 which was to "maintain current limits on the number of charter schools and the length of their terms". In its response, the rationale given was, "Choice is one of the strengths of our learning system. If the limit of 15 is reached, the government wants to retain the option to review and decide if an expansion beyond the current limit is appropriate". We wonder what has caused Alberta Education to seemingly alter its perspective concerning the concept of choice.

Still on the topic of choice, a good deal of publicity surrounding the strength of the public education system in Alberta was noted in a series of articles in two major Quebec dailies in September 2010. These articles were closely linked to the importance of alternative and autonomous schools and the notion of choice as two harbingers of the strength of our public school system. It is interesting that at a time when other provinces are beginning to see the value of choice, Alberta Education appears to be moving in a different direction.

- b. **To continue to promote a culture of responsible and flexible governance** – Again, we have responded to the Minister's request for feedback regarding "Inspiring Education" and "Inspiring Action" saying that we believe our governance model is responsible and flexible.

In fact, through the evolution of a variety of governance models in charter schools, we believe that we have some valuable insights to share and we would welcome participation in further dialogue. However, we are concerned with some of the implications in the survey's questions relating to future schools. In particular, there is an increased "accountability" aspect being suggested. Our association has always stated that we must be accountable to the public, but upon reading some of the survey questions we wonder what is being suggested. These questions are:

"To what extent do you agree that the extension of the term of future charter schools in Alberta should be dependent on specific criteria such as student success, a positive evaluation by government or independent body and the demonstrated need for further research?",

"To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have an accountability to ensure that research is subject to peer review?",

"To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have an accountability to submit their research for academic publication?" and,

"To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have a more rigorous accountability for improved student achievement than school jurisdictions?"

As noted, one of our goals is to promote a culture of responsible and flexible governance; to add another layer of bureaucracy to our operations is not in keeping with such a goal. For instance, these questions imply that our students are advantaged in some way, and therefore perhaps more scholarly or talented than students in a non-charter school. We invite individuals and/or organizations, to look more closely at this belief. Our students too have a wide range of abilities. They enroll with us because of the charter, not because they are necessarily academically gifted, talented or otherwise advantaged.

Further, where research and publication are concerned, we believe that not all research is empirical. How will this be measured? Again, even having a peer review constitutes another bureaucratic step in the operation of the school, and therefore involves additional time and cost. We believe it is important to note that research is a means to an end (developing exemplary teaching practices and serving as centres of innovation) and not an end in itself (research for the sake of research).

We firmly believe that the current "pillars of accountability" approach which is applied to all Alberta schools is excellent, and therefore do not understand why charter schools would be evaluated in a significantly different manner. As it is, no public school in the province is subject to the same five-year intense evaluation as a charter school, and we are confused as to why this would need to be further intensified through additional accountability requirements.

Regarding teacher qualifications, we understand the concerns of the ATA about certification and membership, but fundamental to some of our schools (e.g. Calgary Arts Academy) is their ability to employ staff who are not necessarily certificated teachers. These non-certificated teachers are, however, held to the same level of accountability as their certificated colleagues, and student success is not sacrificed.

- c. **To achieve permanent charter status** - Our association, in pursuing this goal, is not suggesting that we have no accountability. We believe we still must maintain adherence to our charters, and be held accountable in doing so. We do not see regular Alberta Education evaluations as negative. In fact, the feeling is quite the contrary. We are, however, faced with several challenges regarding the uncertainty of not having “permanence”. One difficulty lies with the insecurity facing our schools when there is a need for facility improvements or relocation. We do not have access to the same funding sources as the regular school divisions, and do not even own our own properties. To ask a lending institution for finances to improve a building which we do not own is clearly problematic, and in some circumstances our schools are less than adequate for our students and staff.

Another difficulty relates to research initiatives. If Alberta Education determines that charter schools will be Centres of Research, there is a need for permanence. For instance, if a school wishes to enter into a longitudinal research study with a university there is clearly an expectation that the school will be in existence for a significant period of time, or the researchers would certainly be hesitant to enter into such an agreement. Clearly, this hampers the research agenda which Alberta Education wishes to pursue.

Our ability to develop partnerships within the province’s educational community is also an issue. No other organization’s members are subject to “five-year renewals”, and it has been suggested that this “second-class citizen” status might be related to the reluctance of some stakeholders to embrace us as true educational partners on the provincial scene.

In essence, to know that our schools have permanent status (no more nor less than other “regular public schools”), while accepting that we still must meet the expectations of our charters, is a major priority for our association.

Conclusion:

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools welcomes the opportunity to respond to the “Action on Research and Innovation” survey and trusts that our constituents’ views will be taken into consideration when decisions are made regarding the future of our schools. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

January 19, 2011